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The Terracottas from the Sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis at Messene

Maria Spathi

Introduction

- 1 During the course of the first Theban campaign in 370/369 B.C.E. Epameinondas founded the independent state of Messenia around a fortified settlement at the foot of Mount Ithome. The choice of this location was based on the potential of Mount Ithome as a fortification bulwark. But it also was a traditional place of worship, as the cult of Zeus Ithomatas at the summit of Mount Ithome can be traced back to before the foundation of the new city. On the south slope of Ithome two new sanctuaries were founded, the sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis and the so-called sanctuary of Eileithyia and the Kouretes. The sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis is located on the south-eastern flank of Mount Ithome, on a prominent rocky spur outside the urban area, but within the fortification wall. It is located at a distance of about 800 m as the crow flies from the Agora and 600 m from the Laconian gate, the city's main gate to the east. Numerous finds came to light during excavations of the sanctuary, among which were many terracotta figurines. This paper briefly presents the site and the terracottas, which currently are undergoing study for a definitive publication; this also will include discussion of types of terracottas from the other excavated sanctuaries within the ancient city.

The sanctuary

- 2 Between 1842 and 1843, Philippe Le Bas conducted excavations atop a natural plateau on the northern slopes of Mount Ithome, about 800 m from the city center. There he discovered the foundations of an Ionian temple with two columns in antis, an altar, and a peribolos¹ (Fig. 1). Two inscriptions associate the sanctuary with Artemis Limnatis. The first one lists the priestesses of Artemis (IG V, 1, 1442) and the second, discovered

in the Agora, mentions an «ἱερεῖαν Λιμν[ατίδος] Ἀρτέμιδος» (IG V, 1 1458). Le Bas also brought to light three more manumission inscriptions, one of which preserves the name of Limnatis (IG V, 1, 1470, 1471, 1472). In addition, among other finds unearthed by him were fragments of the cult statue, now lost.²

Fig. 1. Topographical plan of the city of Messene

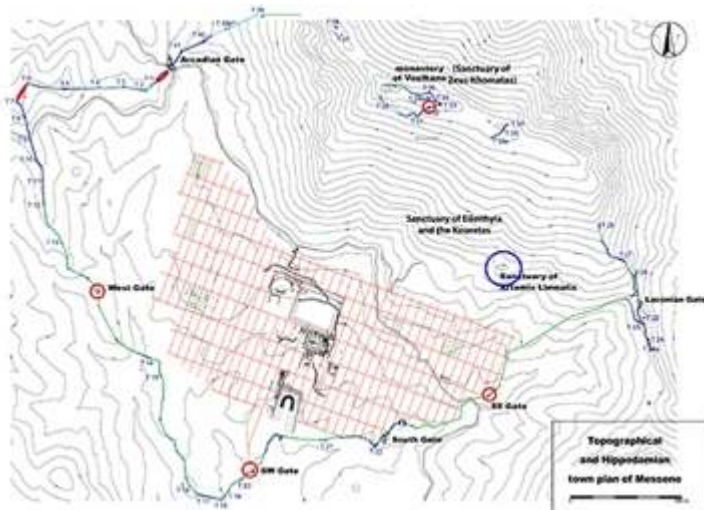


Photo: Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies

- 3 Since its original discovery, the sanctuary became totally covered by vegetation. It was in 1988 when Petros Themelis oversaw the cleaning of the area that the remains of the temple, the altar, and the peribolos re-appeared. This campaign was followed by landscaping and restoration work in 2006 and 2008, resulting in the complete exposure of the temple, the altar, and buildings located to the east, south, and west of the temple (Fig. 2). This work has been funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (2011/2012), the University of Rostock (2016), private donors, and in 2018 by the University of Kiel and the CRC 1266 Scales of Transformations.

Fig. 2. Aerial view of the sanctuary



Photo: Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies

- 4 The main building of the sanctuary is a Corinthian style temple in antis, generally dated to the third century B.C.E., with a cult statue that was located in the middle of the *sekos*, set atop a limestone base. South of the temple four other minor buildings were revealed (A-D) of different sizes and ground plans. Excavations conducted in 2018 focused on the area along Building D and its northern side, as well as part of its interior. Building D was erected on the western edge of the plateau. Although not fully excavated yet, the recent finds suggest a rather practical use of the building, maybe that of the preparation of meals and sacrifices.

The finds

- 5 Several finds were recovered during the earlier 1988 excavation and landscaping campaigns, most of them coming from the area around the temple and some from Building B as well. However, the majority of the finds were brought to light during the 2018 campaign. These comprised terracotta figurines, bronzes, and pottery that were unearthed outside Building D, along its northern wall. The finds probably came from a dispersed deposit west of the temple. A small assemblage, mostly pottery, has also been found in front of the building along its eastern wall within a layer of hard soil over the natural bedrock. Finally, a small number of almost intact vessels and two cut-out, round reliefs with the depiction of a Gorgoneion were found inside the building in its NW corner around a probable “foundation” deposit.

The terracottas

- 6 Excavations in the various sanctuaries in the city of Messene yielded a large number of terracottas. Most are made with the typical local clay, which is soft with large inclusions, mica, and a coarse surface. The majority of these figurines were produced using a frontal mold, with the backs covered by a slab, or slightly modelled with the fingers. Exceptions to this are the figurines found at the so-called sanctuary of Demeter and the Dioskouroi³ at Messene, dating to the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., that are small, solid, and lacking in detail. Probably their molds were used for a long period of time, and/or new molds were made from one of the figurines, so that the figurines gradually diminished in size. In addition, several fragments of large, hand-modeled, figurines were found in the so-called sanctuary of Eileithyia and the Kouretes on Mount Ithome.⁴ There also were terracottas of large horses and bovines that were made by more than one mold, so that they were modeled in-the-round.

The terracottas from the sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis

- 7 The figurines from the sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis represent females, but also found was a small mask of a male, the upper part of a horse leg, and a boukranion.⁵ The female figurines include mostly types of Artemis. Noteworthy among them are two well-preserved heads of Artemis of very good quality and belonging to figurines larger in size than the majority of the ones found on site. They are both modeled in-the-round, the first one with hair drawn back and tied low on her neck, and the other one with hair tied in a knot on top of the head (Fig. 3). Both show a thin, plain fillet

represented as tied around the head. These iconographic types of the heads are rather typical for both Artemis and Aphrodite.

Fig. 3. Head of Artemis



Author photo

- 8 Artemis in Messene is represented mainly in a short chiton with an overfold and an animal skin wrapped around the body and bound with a belt. The tail of the animal hangs downwards between the thighs. She also wears high leather boots (*ενδρομίδες*) and a tall stephane. She holds a very tall torch in her left hand, or at her right side, and often a dog is seated by her right foot turning its head towards her. Five different iconographic types of Artemis are attested in the sanctuary, although the differences between them are rather small. The following versions of the Artemis figurines have been so far distinguished:
1. Artemis is represented standing, wearing a chiton with a long overfold and an animal skin draped over while a stephane rests on her head. She holds a tall torch with her left hand.
 2. The same type as above but with a phiale in her left hand. Many examples of this type are preserved (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Artemis figurine



Author photo.

1. The right hand rests on her hip, while the left holds the torch, which is very long and runs parallel to the body. The goddess wears a short chiton and an animal skin, whose tail falls between her thighs. The animal skin is rendered plastically (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Artemis figurine



Author photo

1. Artemis is holding a torch in her left hand and a phiale in her right. She wears a short chiton with an animal skin, leaving the left breast uncovered. She stands with the weight on her right leg, while the left bent at the knee.
2. With the torch in her left hand. It is not frontally depicted but the head turns slightly to the right and downwards, the hair is long and fall on the shoulders. The characteristics of the face are small and sweet (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Artemis figurine



Author photo

1. Artemis wearing a chiton with a long overfold, without the animal skin. She holds the torch with her right hand, while her left arm hangs at her side (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7. Artemis figurine



Author photo

- 9 Numerous fragments of the type in short chiton, high leather boots, and a dog on her right are preserved. This is a type well known from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, where many representations of Artemis came to light. Among them fragments of a bronze statuette and a marble cult statue, both representing Artemis, were discovered in the fill around the temple of Artemis Orthia, dated to the late fourth or early third century B.C.E. The cult of Artemis Orthia was one of the first to be established at Messene.⁶ After the foundation of the Asklepieion the cult was transferred in the new Artemision at the north end of the west wing of Asklepieion. There is where Pausanias (IV, 31, 10-11) saw the cult statue of Artemis Phosphoros made by Damophon, which must have been similar to the main iconographic type of Artemis with the torch.
- 10 Apart from the aforementioned representations of Artemis in terracotta from the sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis, there is a fragmentary marble statuette of the goddess from the sanctuary on Ithome, preserving only the head with hair pulled back and tied low in a knot, a leg with high leather boots and a base with parts of the leg. Also, there is a small bronze statuette, modeled simply and with no details that was originally attached to another object (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. Bronze statuette of Artemis



Author photo

- 11 The Messenian type of Artemis bears certain iconographic similarities to the representation of the Phrygian goddess Bendis in Attica in the late fourth and early third century B.C.E., but also to Hekate and the Thessalian goddess Enodia. The cult of Bendis was introduced to Attica at the second half of the fifth century B.C.E. But while Bendis wears the Phrygian pilos (αλωπεκίς), the Messenian Artemis wears a simple stephane. The long chlamys of Bendis is also missing in the Messenian examples.⁷ The phiale, as well as the dog, are characteristic of the Attic type of Bendis, which, from the

fourth century onwards, was attested almost everywhere in the Greek world. The torch is a common attribute for both Hekate and Enodia. But representations of Artemis also are suitable for the light-bearing images of divinity.⁸ There are many representations of the goddess holding a torch, or even two, as is often attested by Pausanias (Paus. VIII, 37.1, 3-4; IX, 19.6). Furthermore, Artemis was worshipped as Artemis En(n)odia, as suggested by inscriptions found in Nemea, Epidauros, and Syracuse but also in the city of Messene.⁹ Similar Artemis Bendis figurines, but wearing a Phrygian pilos instead of the Messenian stephane, have been excavated in Dyrrhachion and Herakleia.¹⁰

- 12 Apart from the aforementioned representations of Artemis, the 2018 excavations yielded additional types of figurines. Some mold-made figurines of hydriaphoroi were found, as well as separately-made arms attached to the mold-made body, sometimes with a tenon at the end of the arm. There also were a female figurine with a tray or a flat basket with modeled fruits and cakes, female figures in sleeved chitons, girded under the breast, and torsos of seated “dolls.” In addition, there are several female heads resembling Attic Tanagrans. One example is slightly turned to the left and is covered by a himation that is pulled up over it like a hood. Another has hair centrally parted and is crowned with an ivy wreath. There are also standing female figurines with the right arm bent to the chest, probably holding a votive offering, a type known from the other Messenian sanctuaries.
- 13 Finally, as mentioned above, two cut-out terracotta reliefs of the early Hellenistic period depicting a frontal Gorgoneion were found around a “foundation” deposit at the NW corner of Building D. One has curly hair and the other has two snakes knotted beneath the chin. Both reliefs have two suspension holes on the upper part.¹¹ The majority of the aforementioned pottery and terracotta finds date from the late fourth to the second century B.C.E.

The terracottas from the other Messenian sanctuaries

- 14 Two deposits from the so-called sanctuary of Demeter and the Dioskouroi, NW of the Asklepieion, and dated before the re-foundation of the city by Epameinondas in 369 B.C.E., contained a vast number of terracottas.¹² They represent female adorants holding offerings, peplophoroi without attributes, standing young men wearing a himation, and standing youths with a himation over the shoulders and a cock cradled in the left arm. Numerous relief plaques, the so-called heroic plaques,¹³ also were found in the above deposits; these depict riders, hoplites, reclining banqueters, libation scenes, seated figures, couples, and female triads. Similar plaques were found in the deposits excavated in the south courtyard of the Asklepieion that probably related to a hero cult. The above terracottas are generally dated between the sixth and the fourth century B.C.E., with the majority falling within the fifth century B.C.E.
- 15 Different are the terracottas from the neighboring sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, on the terrace at the NW edge of the Asklepieion, which is dated after the foundation of the city. This probably continued to function until the second century B.C.E. The deposits from the sanctuary comprised mostly figurines of Artemis and standing females in chiton with an offering in the hand. Artemis is frontally depicted with a short chiton, an animal skin around her body, high boots, and a stephane on the head. She holds a long torch close to her side, and a dog, looking upwards, is seated by her right leg.

- 16 Lastly, from the so-called sanctuary of Eileithyia and the Kouretes on Mount Ithome¹⁴ a large number of terracottas also came to light. The assemblage includes figurines of hydriaphoroi, women carrying piglets, kourotraphoi, a Baubo figurine, protomai, and many fragments of impressive large-sized figurines of horses and bovines up to 45cm in height. They date from the early third to the second century B.C.E.
- 17 Generally, the terracottas from the sanctuaries of ancient Messene seem to be characteristic of the specific nature of the deities worshipped. The majority of the types are only found in one sanctuary and they are related to the cult and the rituals of their respective sanctuaries. The exception, of course, is the Artemis figurines, found in both sanctuaries of Artemis, i.e. the Artemis Orthia sanctuary, as well as the Artemis Limnatis.
- 18 The epithet Limnatis describes the proximity to water and give us an indication of the character of the deity worshipped, who was associated with water.¹⁵ The finds of the 2018 excavation suggest that the sanctuary was founded shortly after the foundation of the city in 369 B.C.E. Future excavations on site, and a thorough study of the finds, will reveal a more specific date for the foundation of the sanctuary on Ithome, a greater understanding of the use of each one of the buildings around the temple, and of course, a better understanding of the character of the cult.

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ENDNOTES

1. Le Bas 1844, 426-432; Reinach 1888, 134-138; Themelis 1994b, 153.
2. Themelis 1988, fig. 15, pl. 57a-b.
3. Themelis 1998.
4. Spathi 2017.
5. Similar to the horses found in the so-called sanctuary of Eileithyia, Spathi 2017.
6. Themelis 1994.

7. LIMC III (1986) 95–97 s.v. Bendis (D. Goceva-D. Popov); Baumer 1997, 75–76; More recently, Damaskos, 33–40, pl. 14–16.
8. Parisinou 2000, 81–83.
9. Bardani 2017.
10. Hinz 1998, 190, from Herakleia. *Artémis à Dyrrhachion. Guides de Durres* 1.
11. For other examples see, Schmidt 1998, 163, pl. 48. Petrochilos 2014, 165–168.
12. Themelis 1998. Spathi 2015.
13. Salapata 2017.
14. Spathi 2017.
15. Sinn 1981, generally, about sanctuaries of Artemis Limnatis.

ABSTRACTS

This work-in-progress focuses on the terracottas from the sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis on Mount Ithome in ancient Messene. The assemblage includes mostly Artemis figurines of a type similar to the iconography of Artemis Bendis in Attica, but also of Hekate and Enodia in Thessaly. Apart from the terracotta figurines from the sanctuary, terracottas from the other sanctuaries in the city, such as the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, also are briefly discussed.

INDEX

Keywords: Messene, Mount Ithome, Artemis Limnatis, sanctuary, terracottas, hydriaphoroi, Artemis figurines, Artemis Orthia

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